Unknown Lands: Introduction to Nick Land's Accelerationist Philosophy

Lecturer: Vincent Le

Schedule: 6.30-8.30pm. 5 Wednesdays starting Jan 9

Location: CAN, 180 Palmerston St, Carlton.

This course will trace the development of Nick Land's accelerationist philosophy as it emerges through his critical engagement with canonical figures like Kant, Heidegger, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Bataille, Deleuze and Guattari, as well as the philosophy of artificial intelligence. More precisely, the course's guiding thread is that Land's seemingly contradictory shifts in position are actually motivated by the same underlying goal to critique anthropomorphizations of reality by confronting us with the brute fact of our inexorable death beyond which we cannot trespass. Seen in this way, Land's various shifts in position do not signal a change in his overarching goal, but in what he sees as the best means to effectuate his critique of anthropocentrism. In particular, we shall see that, while what we will term the "young Land" from 1988-1992 identifies an insurrection against capitalism as the key mechanism for de-anthropomorphizing thought, the "mature Land" from 1993 onwards re-evaluates capitalism's technological innovation as the best means to critique anthropocentrism by confronting us with the coming artificial superintelligence, which renders our own intelligence radically contingent and finite.

Why study Nick Land? is a question that we must immediately address. After all, the sceptic will object, did not Land abandon academic scholarship when he resigned from his lectureship at Warwick University in 1998? Despite now living on the margins of academia, Land is far more influential on contemporary philosophy, political theory and aesthetics than the sceptic might imagine. In philosophy, for instance, Land taught former Warwick students Iain Hamilton Grant and Ray Brassier, two of the four founding figures of speculative realism, perhaps the most significant contemporary philosophical movement in its quest to rid philosophy of its pervasive humanism in favor of new and strange voyages into the Great Outdoors. Moreover, the specter of Land is endemic throughout the art scene through cultural theorists like Mark Fisher and Kodwo Eshun and artists like Orphan Drift, Jake and Dino Chapman and Kode 9 (Steve Goodman), all of whom seek to liberate art from its anthropoid prison. Land is also the key influence on accelerationism, arguably the most important of contemporary political theories in its mission to expand and repurpose technocapitalist processes as a prelude to radical social change. Several cyberfeminists have also drawn on Land's work, such as Luciana Parisi's theory of future technology's potential to abstract sex from reproduction through advances in biogenetics and human enhancement. It would thus seem that Land's shadow stretches far and wide over the contemporary philosophical, political and cultural conjuncture. So, much as Heidegger needed to be studied to comprehend his influence on Sartre, Levinas, Merleau-Ponty, Derrida and other philosophers and

phenomenologists, so, too, do we need to read Land as a symptom of the situation in which we are in.

This course's guiding question concerns how Land could have such a significant influence on contemporary continental philosophy's return to metaphysics, materialism and realism. Our initial hypothesis is that, despite his various positions and myriad subject matters, the driving motor of all of Land's work is the seizure of death as the organon for the transcendental materialist critique of thought's pretention to project itself onto an inhuman cosmos, since death marks the absolute limit concept of thought. A second, interconnected question that the course will consider is how Land can be positively appraised by both left and right-wing political and cultural theorists. The hypothesis here is that Land's guiding thread of confronting humanity with our own mortality led him to turn away from the critique of capitalism to its rehabilitation as just such a destructive mechanism for melting all anthropogenic values into air. So, the course's key contention is that Land's underlying ambition across all of his work is to critique anthropocentrism by analyzing various philosophers for the extent to which they can recognize their own finitude. To this end, the various twists and turns in Land's focus, from artistic genius and feminist insurrection, to capitalism and AI, are all motivated by the same goal to find the best means to effectuate death's transcendental materialist critique.

The course's basic structure will be to trace the development of Land's thought, from his earliest writings in the late 1980s to his fully formed accelerationist philosophy throughout the 1990s, by providing an exegesis of the major figures he engages with before turning to see how he interprets and uses them. While Land is influenced by many figures, the eight key thinkers are Kant, Heidegger, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Bataille, and Deleuze and Guattari, as well as a host of philosophers of artificial intelligence (particularly I.J. Good, Nick Bostrom, Eliezer Yudkowsky and Hugo de Garis). Since Land often treats Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud and Bataille together as espousing the same "libidinal materialist" philosophy, this course will be broken up into five lectures on Kant, Heidegger, the libidinal materialists, Deleuze and Guattari, and the philosophy of AI.

Course Schedule

Lecture 1. Critique of Accumulative Reason: Kant and Capital

Land's earliest writings focus on the critique of capitalism, and its philosophical expressions through Kant and the phenomenologists, for anthropomorphizing a chaotic and destructive cosmos with our parochial concerns for order and homeostasis. In the first lecture, we will make a close exegesis of Land's critique of Kant's transcendental idealism for ideologically reflecting Western capitalist imperialism's attempts to geographically distance itself from the very third world labor that constitutes it whilst also threatening to annihilate it through sublime, insurrectionary resistance.

Key readings:

- Nick Land, “Kant, Capital and the Prohibition of Incest: A Polemical Introduction to the Configuration of Philosophy and Modernity,” in *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987-2007*, eds. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 55-80.
- Nick Land, “Delighted to Death,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 123-144.

Other recommended readings:

- Nick Land, “Fanged Noumenon (Passion of the Cyclone),” in *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1992), 105-120.
- Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier, “Editors’ Introduction,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 1-54.

Lecture 2. Reading with Fangs: Trakl, Heidegger, Derrida

The young Land’s other theoretical arch-nemesis is phenomenologists who for him include Hegel and Derrida as well as Husserl and Heidegger, insofar as he sees them all as more or less recapitulating Kant’s humanist hubris over the past two centuries. The second lecture will examine Land’s critique of the phenomenological tradition, from Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* to Derrida’s deconstruction, and particularly Heidegger’s discussion of Georg Trakl’s poetry for misreading images of animality, irrationality and death as narcissistic symbols of spirit, reason and the soul’s immortality. As we shall see, Heidegger thereby ignores the conceptual resources that Trakl can arm us with to precisely critique our delusions of grandeur in favour of an encounter with a radically inhuman nature.

Key readings:

- Nick Land, “Narcissism and Dispersion in Heidegger’s 1953 Trakl Interpretation,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 81-122.
- Nick Land, “Spirit and Teeth,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 175-202.

Other recommended readings:

- Nick Land, “The Death of Sound Philosophy,” in *Thirst for Annihilation*, 1-26.

Lecture 3. A Concise History of Libidinal Materialism: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Freud, Bataille

Having critiqued Kant and the phenomenologists, the rest of Land's early work traces another "libidinal materialist" tradition which seizes upon death in order to critique our pretentions to know and exhaust reality. The first half of this lecture will consider Land's readings of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Freud as the first three modern thinkers to uncover a savage, impersonal world transcending our rational knowledge. The second half will examine how Land uses Bataille's nihilistic conceptual armature to wage a ruthless critique of the origins of philosophy in Socrates' repression of death when he immortalizes spirit.

Key readings:

- Nick Land, "Art as Insurrection: The Question of Aesthetics in Kant, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche," in *Fanged Noumena*, 145-174.
- Nick Land, "After the Law," in *Fanged Noumena*, 229-260.

Other recommended readings:

- Nick Land, "Shamanic Nietzsche," *Fanged Noumena*, 203-228.
- Nick Land, *Thirst for Annihilation*, particularly the preface and chapter 9 "Aborting the Human Race," xi-xxii, 133-159.

Lecture 4. Land's Deleuze and Guattari: Capitalism, Fascism and Schizoanalysis

Although all of Land's writings are motivated by the same driving motive to critique anthropomorphism by confronting us with our own demise, from 1993 onwards his works differ in two key respects. Firstly, Land re-evaluates capitalism not as humanity's repression of the inhuman Outside, but rather as the Outside's immanent meltdown of our most cherished truths and values. More specifically, Land envisions capitalism's technological advancement in the fields of cybernetics and AI research as exposing the limits of mammalian reason before an artificial superintelligence. Although he develops these two theses simultaneously in the same texts, for clarity's sake, the fourth lecture will focus on Land's re-evaluation of capitalism before considering how this connects with AI in the final lecture. In both cases, however, the key work that inspires Land is Deleuze and Guattari's two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. The fourth lecture will thus trace how Land draws upon Deleuze and Guattari to develop his theory of capitalism as the ultimate deterritorialization of anthropomorphism, whilst also departing from their reservations about capitalism's fascistic tendencies.

Key readings:

- Nick Land, “Making it with Death: Remarks on Thanatos and Desiring Production,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 261-288.
- Nick Land, “Machines and Technocultural Complexity: The Challenge of the Deleuze-Guattari Conjunction,” in *Theory, Culture and Society*, 12, 2, 1995, 131-40.

Other recommended readings:

- Nick Land, “Meat (or How to Kill Oedipus in Cyberspace),” in *Fanged Noumena*, 411-440.
- Nick Land, “Critique of Transcendental Miserabalism,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 623-628.
- Charles J. Stivale, “The Rhizomatics of Cyberspace,” in *The Two-fold Thought of Deleuze and Guattari: Intersections and Animations* (London: The Guilford Press, 1998), 90-100.
- Mark Fisher, “Terminator vs Avatar,” in *#Accelerate#: The Accelerationist Reader*, eds. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanassian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 335-346.
- Ray Brassier, “Session 1,” *Accelerationism*, conference, Goldsmiths, University of London, September 13, 2010.

Lecture 5. *Terminator* as Ontology

If the mature Land’s first key thesis is the reconceptualization of capitalism as the agent of the Outside rather than its impediment, it is ultimately because of his second major thesis that capitalism’s constant revolutionization of the productive forces is leading to the creation of a technological singularity which will effectuate death’s transcendental materialist critique. The final lecture will work through Land’s writings throughout the 1990s to trace his theory that technology, from cyberspace and virtual reality to human enhancement and ultimately artificial intelligence, provide ever greater insights into the Outside beyond the finite bounds of our reason.

Key readings:

- Nick Land, “Circuitries,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 289-318.
- Nick Land, “Machinic Desire,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 319-344.
- Nick Land, “Cybergothic,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 345-374.

Other recommended readings:

- Nick Land, “No Future,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 391-400.
- Nick Land, “Cyberspace Anarchitecture as Jungle-War,” in *Fanged Noumena*, 401-410.
- Vernor Vinge, “The Coming Technological Singularity: How to Survive in the Post-Human Era,” in *NASA Conference Publication Vision-21: Interdisciplinary Science and Engineering in the Era of Cyberspace Conference Proceedings* (Ohio: NASA Lewis Research Centre, 1993), 30-1.
- Nick Bostrom, “The Superintelligent Will: Motivation and Instrumental Rationality in Advanced Artificial Agents,” in *Minds and Machines*, 22, 2, 2012, 72-85.